

THE FRENCH WOMAN AND HER FAMILY LIFE¹

WHAT follows has no value whatever but that of a personal testimony on a matter which has, no doubt, little originality, but is perhaps more often described in its exterior aspects than shown from the inside. I am not going to quote books; and I have not gone to statistics; I only want to state frankly and simply what I have seen and what I feel. The impersonal style would be over-ambitious and misleading; and I must apologize for referring frequently, openly, to my own experience. What I have to say may not be of very broad import; at least, and within my limits, I feel very much at home with my subject. I have been brought up in a family the women of which took a large share in everything; and I have always felt a peculiar interest in what I could gather concerning the lives of other women. Moreover, the habit of comparing the French and the Anglo-Saxon characters has perhaps allowed me to perceive some of those points that want defining before a real understanding can be reached between us; to judge of our merits and our faults—according to my own impressions, of course, but from a point of view which is very often akin to yours.

The women I can speak of are all of one sort: they belong to the French middle class, and mostly to the intellectual part of it; but that class is a large one, and gives the nation some of its most characteristic features. They are

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not hampered and crushed by material difficulties, as is the case with the women of the people. Their modes of life, in a measure, originate in a free choice, either of theirs or of their mothers' and grandmothers'. By complying with long-settled habits, traditional notions of duty, deep-rooted feelings, they reveal the ingrained tendencies of the race. And, on the other hand, they don't know the temptations which beset women of more wealthy classes; they are not raised above the common duties of life, above public opinion; they will not, or will rarely, indulge in egotism or wanton freaks. Their initiative is limited and directed by a sense of their many responsibilities. And whenever they innovate, opening new ways for themselves and their sisters, there is a good chance that in doing so they will, with enlightened minds and grave hearts, sketch forth the future of their nation; their inner promptings and new requirements lead to the gradual unveiling of its ideal.

I shall very briefly dispose of the person commonly believed in foreign countries to be the typical French woman—the elegant, luxurious, airy, extravagant coquette, forgetful of all her duties, and having no thought but of finery, intrigue and love, with whom modern playwrights have made you familiar. Why is it that she has been so often depicted? Maybe the honest lives of dutiful, quiet, ordinary women would not afford very fascinating subjects for novels or plays. Our literature, for its more striking effects, draws on imagination rather than on reality; it may sometimes be appreciated for the very reason that it brings an antidote against the monotony of every-day life. But if we are to believe the booksellers, their best customers, the ones that will buy most readily their yellow-back books, are the foreigners staying in Paris for the sake of its amusements. Such a creature as the so-called Parisian coquette may exist,

though; you may have caught sight of figures suggestive of her on our "Grands Boulevards," or even in the "Quartier Latin" on festive occasions. In the latter case she would wear an academic cap, and mix noisily with students—though she is by no means to be mistaken for the French student-girl, a totally different being. Whatever may be her appearance, she is to be met with mostly in composite and hardly French circles; as a matter of fact, we do not recognize her as one of us; we call her "cosmopolitan." What I have to tell next will amply show, I hope, that our faults are most often the very reverse of those she is charged with.

It is sometimes said among us that, in Anglo-Saxon countries, women enjoy their freest and most complete expansion before they are married, while with us it comes only after marriage. I shall adopt the French view and begin with matrimony.

The "mariage de convenance" is often considered, abroad, as the one form of union known among the French. And it may be true that with us, in the majority of cases, marriages are planned and arranged beforehand by the parents of the young people concerned. Moreover, in most families that can afford it, a large or small dowry is settled upon the bride and handed to the young couple, according to various legal arrangements—which gives a rather prosaic aspect to the whole affair, to put it moderately. That French conception of matrimony can hardly be defended in its crude and dry form; but it may be qualified and explained.

First of all, it is not universally put in practice; far from it. An increasing number of young women, especially among those who go in for liberal professions, mixing on friendly terms with young men, shape their own future, and choose independently their companions for life. But even

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when the older custom still prevails, it does not mean that marriage is a mere financial transaction, everybody acting on the optimistic belief that, as was sometimes said, love always comes afterward. It does not mean that parents are more solicitous about the worldly advantage of their children than about their happiness; or that young people are hopelessly devoid of all right feeling. "French marriage" is very largely an outcome of the austere education and strict habits of our girls. Though great changes have taken place in that respect, and more are coming, young ladies often have no free social intercourse, and few outdoor games, allowing them to meet young men, talk to them, learn how to judge them. I know many circles in which girls—intelligent, capable, energetic and sweet girls—full-grown women, in fact, lead secluded lives, engrossed in the interests, the occupations of their parents, taking such diversions only as they can share with their families; there would be no marriage possible for them if some eligible gentleman were not placed in their way. Now in all the cases I have known, every opportunity has been given the young people for them to become fully acquainted with each other and to come to a decision according to their own hearts. We have travelled very far, indeed, from the old-fashioned notions of duty, according to which getting married, for a girl, was primarily an occasion for passiveness and filial obedience.

Independent courtship may be more romantic, but it is more adventurous as well; and the French tradition is not without advantages. Social fitness, similarity in tastes, general disposition, habits and education are generally insured beforehand by the foresight of the parents. In fact, happy marriages are numerous with us, and decided failures rare; there are comparatively few cases of divorce in France, and it is not easy to tell where perfect wisdom lies; but some-

thing of our old custom is bound to survive, so long as we have quiet, retiring girls as well as independent, self-relying ones.

Now let us consider the French girl when just married, according to her own heart, after due courtship, under the discreet and benevolent supervision of her family; for such is still the French middle-class ideal—there is no doubt about it. The general bent of her education has not made her self-assertive; she has been taught to make herself agreeable and useful among her own people, and has generally no peculiar object of interest or specialized occupation in life. Again, I am not speaking of our women professors, women doctors, painters, or student-girls. Those belong to the “advanced set”; their number is growing daily; but they are still in a minority; and it is the average girl I mean to deal with. Our new-married wife then gives herself up uncritically and unreservedly to her new feelings and her new avocations. Her highest wish is to share in her husband’s intellectual or professional life—later on in that of her children. She devotes herself to her part as his helpmate with a single-mindedness, a fullness of heart which are perhaps unparalleled; and I need not say that it very much enhances their general intimacy. It gives it substance, strength and charm; it gives it an almost sacred character. His aims, his interests, his grievances and troubles, his struggles and successes are hers entirely. She will be consulted, listened to in every delicate or embarrassing case. Even the material signs of her husband’s confidence are dear to her; selecting texts, correcting proofs, making press-cuttings, copying a manuscript are privileges. All those are labors of love; time will be made for such occupations in the busiest day, and the task cheerfully, proudly performed.

That is the best part of life—life on its highest plane.

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Now there are also domestic duties, the own, special province of women. Husbands generally take very little interest in them, whatever pretense they may make to the contrary. They like comfort and are given plenty of it, without knowing much about its ways and means. The principle of the division of labor, with most couples, works pretty strictly in that matter. The question whether it is quite fair may be left aside; most French women would not raise it. They have a natural gift that way, and however they may spend and sometimes exhaust themselves over it, they take the liveliest interest in the management of their homes. Many feel pride in their skill, and would make a stand for the superiority of women on that account, resenting any supposed interference, and pooh-poohing masculine assistance whenever it is proffered.

Not being a very good housewife myself, I may be allowed, in due humility, to praise the industriousness, the cleverness of my countrywomen. With most of them, personal and constant supervision of household work, if not an actual share in it, is a question of education and principle quite as much as or more than a necessity. It is a tradition so deeply rooted that in some cases it amounts to routine. Generally, though, this routine will be vivified by sheer love of work, whatever its nature, by the will to perform any appointed task with practised skill and technical perfection. And as she applies to her domestic problems her whole mind and her own soul, the French woman will imprint a personal stamp on the aspect, the decoration, the habits, the working of her home.

She has her own difficulties, though. The servant problem is perhaps more acute with you than it is with us; it can hardly be more prickly. We are a democracy too, or try to be; and we have no colored people, as a last resource in our

domestic extremities. Inducing one's free countrywomen and fellow-citizens to do menial work is no light task, and it takes more than money to get regular and tolerable service; it takes a great deal of tact, skilful authority, and philosophy. Joining in part of the work often proves the best policy—or the only successful one. Then our architects have treated us badly: central heating, lifts, hot and cold water in bath-rooms and wash-stands, large gas-stoves, perfected kitchen appliances are still rarities with us, especially in the provinces. Washing, ironing, cleaning have to be performed without any mechanical assistance. Our household work has to be done in the most primitive manner. The French woman will manage to do without what she lacks, and make shift. She can run her house on moderate or restricted means and make it hardly noticeable to all about her; she makes an art of buying—hunting up bargains, getting the best value for her money, carefully adjusting her expenses and her resources. Her cooking has been so often praised that it need not be mentioned again; indeed, the character she has been given for it is quite up to her merit, if it does not even exceed it. She is wonderfully nimble with her needle; her mending is perfect; there is not a hole in her household linen; half the women I know make their own blouses, sometimes whole frocks, and all the clothes of their children up to ten or twelve. I have been initiated in the domestic arrangements of some I considered brainless, and have felt respect for them ever since. It is not done on set principles, according to fixed and well-defined rules; with most of them it is an instinct, but a highly elaborated one, which makes them thoroughly capable of authority and organization in their own province. Now there is never a good point but has its exaggerations; I have sometimes shuddered at the hours spent over a piece of

darning, or in finding out some object a penny cheaper than its current value; I have been inclined to think that the importance of a speck of dust was overrated by some of my countrywomen, and the order of a cupboard pushed to a deplorable pitch of perfection.

When there are children, though, the most fastidious housewife is soon restored to a right sense of proportions. Trained nurses for babies are far less frequently to be met with in France than in Anglo-Saxon families of the same social standing. I believe it is primarily for financial reasons; in most cases, the family income won't allow of it. It may be as well the effect of a preference on the part of French mothers; they throw from the first a good deal of passion into their affection for their children. Many of them would not like to be superseded by anybody or on any occasion in the care of their babies. A maid is generally intrusted with them for part of the afternoon; but the washing, bathing, dressing, feeding of them falls entirely to the mother's share, as well as their amusement and their early tuition. There are few French homes with a regular nursery; but all rooms in the house practically belong to the little people. They have an especial corner—a big box or a cupboard—for their toys; but they take them everywhere, and settle wherever mamma may be detained by her occupations, trotting behind her all through the house. Even father's study, the only sacred spot in the place, is sometimes invaded. Very early, children accompany their mothers on various errands; going through the streets with mamma, shopping with her, or even paying calls, is a treat generally preferred to all other outings. From their third or fourth year, if not earlier, babies are admitted to the family table. In fact, they have no separate life; they

share in that of the grown-ups, and, mostly, in that of their mothers.

Children brought up in that way very soon develop characteristic features. They are French from their cradles—or rather, they are born French. Our babies are very different from the Anglo-Saxon ones. The chubby cheeks, the rosy faces, clear, candid blue eyes of your little ones, their sturdy appearance and simple good-nature, have been looked upon with envy by many a French mother; we are not unaware of the value of health, of sound animal spirits, of a slow and gradual growth as an asset in life. As a matter of fact, French children prove strong and enduring; there is a well-set inner spring in their constitution; their capacity for active employment is early and lasting. The manner in which our soldiers have stood the hardships of the war has given proof of the mettle of the race. The prevailing impression our little ones give, though, at first sight, and judging from appearances, is hardly that of health. They don't seem to enjoy a full and complete physical expansion. Among them you will see a few nervous little beings, anxious, appealing, over-refined little faces. That is our danger. When we steer clear of it—and fortunately we often do so—the French babies show, to their full advantage, some peculiar qualities. They are very early educated, and emerge at once from the region of primitive feelings and instincts which is theirs, into a lighter and softer atmosphere. They grow gentle, considerate, a bit thoughtful, perhaps; and if the parents know how to be playful as well as tender in their relations with the little ones, they lose nothing of their childish gaiety, of their free mirth and happy spontaneity. The mixture in them of freshness, naive candor, delicacy of feeling, clear, straight think-

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ing, and quickness of mind is indeed one of the few perfect things in this world.

One of the generous Americans who have, from the beginning of the war, taken to heart the future of the French race, and assumed an active part in the adoptions of "the fatherless children of France," lately asked a question which gave us much pleasure, making us feel that genuine, deep-reaching sympathy had been born indeed between our nations; and that question was: How is it that the letters of thanks we receive from very young French children—children of the people as well—are both so natural and so refined, show such delicacy of feeling and accuracy in expression? The explanation lies partly, no doubt, in the most general and deep-lying tendencies of French education. Whatever its failings, and however imperfectly it may work in some cases, it results in an early, wide and sound development of the human sensibilities and the mind.

Children should not be over-precocious, though; many French mothers know they are skirting a pitfall, and in many families there is an effort to set the life of the babies on a different plane from that of the other members of the household, a tendency to insist on the conditions of mere physical health, on regular hours, separate occupation and frequent playing with other children. It does not always result in greater independence and more free time for the mother, because it means going against the tide. Our houses have not been planned out for it; our maids will not consent to play the part of babies' nurses, or will be ill adapted to it; the influences of the family at large—uncles, aunts and grandparents—will at times interfere and reinstate the traditional ways. Worse than all, babies themselves seem to have an inordinate craving for the society of grown-ups. It takes often much persuasion to induce them to have

their own games and find out their own amusements. So that, whatever policy she adopts, the life of a mother, in France, is intimately blended with that of her little ones.

When they have grown into school-boys and school-girls, her part is, if anything, enlarged; for it is she again who supervises the work done at home. Rarely is a child sent to a boarding-school in France when it can at all be avoided; school hours are generally from half past eight to half past eleven; and, after the mid-day dinner which brings together all the members of the household, from two to half past four. Even when the mother has what we call "social obligations" or when she likes visiting, she makes a point to be back home by that time, in order to welcome the little ones and see how they set to their tasks, explaining, helping, encouraging, keeping order if need be. Children, as they grow up, become gradually acquainted with all their parents' habits, tastes, interests and ideas; and it creates an unparalleled intimacy between them. Links formed in that way often prove stronger than the attraction of sameness in age, work or condition. When I first went to England, I saw with surprise parties of boys or girls, groups of young people, and more sober gatherings of mature or elderly persons, all going to their recreations or pleasures separately, well sorted according to their time of life and social situation. Now, what a French observer expects, what you will most frequently see in France, is the whole family—father, mother and children, boys and girls, with possibly some relatives, young or old—going out together, on some excursion, visit or party.

There is no excess of authority on the part of the parents. On the contrary, the French family is a republic, and sometimes a rather anarchic one; and young people get the full benefit of their eagerness, exuberance, enthusiasm.

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The older members of the household, keeping in close contact with the younger ones, preserve much freshness of mind and heart; the seriousness of their years is finely tempered with liveliness, charm, and amiable tolerance, and the individual bent of each one is given free play. Small communities can afford to dispense with laws and rules; mutual affection, common pride, common interests and habits generally insure peace, harmony and happiness in our miniature republics. And there is an unsuspected—I should almost make bold to say a unique—charm about French family life. It is rich and sweet; it rests on perfect confidence, free and varied intellectual intercourse, sincere and fresh emotions. All those who share in it feel its price to the extent of preserving it almost jealously. Doors will open readily enough in France; but it is not easy for a stranger to be admitted to the sacredness of a French home.

Now it is the woman who has tended the children, brought them up together, teaching them first and foremost mutual love and forbearance. She has shown the elder how to help her with the younger. She has given each of them his or her task to be daily performed for the common welfare; she has prompted and encouraged them in their various pursuits, inspiring them with hope and faith in their own undertakings and their future, answering and developing in them the sense of sympathy and trust. She has patiently and gradually woven that network of friendly relations which unites all the members of her household and makes it into an organic whole. All that takes us very far indeed from the painted doll or the light coquette too often held up as the typical French woman.

The best things in this world are not perfect, though. Sweet as our family life is, it has its drawbacks; and just as its merits are chiefly to be ascribed to our women, its

faults mostly bear on their lot. Everything, as we have just seen, induces them to devote all their activities and thoughts to their children. As the young souls of her little ones unfold, the French mother is tempted to get more and more centred in them. We have seen that she throws passion into her affection for them; and passion will be at times unfair, narrow or exacting. In spite of the essential liberty generally given them, there is something slightly paralyzing for the young people in the solicitude and love lavished upon them, in the very strength of family ties. If their ambitions, if their tastes are not in accordance with the ideas of their parents, there may be a good deal of suffering on both sides. They have the impetus, the thousand fresh pleasures and interests of youth; in nearly all instances, when there is anything worth speaking of in them, they will break loose and follow their own bent easily enough. The father has his professional occupations and outward life as a diversion; the mother gets the heaviest share of grief. And not only in those exceptional cases will she get torn at heart; the unavoidable partings of life deprive her of the activities she delighted in, of a daily, intimate intercourse which had become for her the bread of life. For many women it means lasting gloom, and the beginning of old age—that old age which comes only when the inner springs of hope and joy have been broken.

The French cherish a fancy, as all nations do, presumably, that their womenfolk remain young for a wonderfully long time. And maybe spontaneity, freshness of emotions and impressions, liveliness may preserve many French women from the appearance of old age for a good many years. But theirs is moral, intellectual youthfulness, not the youthfulness of health; and I am struck, on the contrary, with the number of careworn faces there are among the middle-

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aged women I know. There is buoyancy and charm in their expression, undoubtedly; but tiny lines about their eyes and their mouths, something tired and grave about their features, when they are caught at rest, tell of overwork and worry. It is the effect of countless hours spent over minute, tiresome duties; it shows the strain of divided and constantly broken attention, of heavy responsibilities, and over-eager, engrossing feelings which, in the nature of things, could not bring them only happiness.

Now the remedy called for by such a condition of things is to be found in modern feminism, and its sway is increasing in France. A growing number of girls go in for specialized work; they want to have some trade or profession of their own. With most of them it is a matter of prudence, if not of necessity. They want to be able to make money, if need be; but many desire to play an independent part, and take a personal interest in the world on moral grounds as well. They feel it is a risky thing for a human being to build up a life's work and happiness entirely and solely upon feelings. The question whether a married woman, a woman with a family, should go on with her work is a very hard one; it is impossible to solve it in the abstract, because the answer depends on the facts of the case—on her self, her health, habits, capacities, on her husband, their common wishes and tastes, and the nature of her work primarily. But when she has found her own chosen task in life, she generally manages to reconcile it in a measure with her family duties; she does not lose her interest in it, and finds in it a refuge against the petty worries or unavoidable hardships of her lot. She may, then, not take quite the same amount of pride in acting as her husband's secretary; but if theirs is the right sort of marriage it will be a labor of love with her still, and their union will be the richer for

the elements of variety and interest she herself will bring into it.

As a matter of fact, I know quite a good many women teachers, artists, doctors, dentists, who keep house and bring up their families apparently without feeling any strain in so doing. I need not emphasize how much the war, with us as with the other nations engaged in it, has enlarged the part played by women in all the domains of economic life; new capacities have been revealed, and barriers broken down which it will be impossible to set up again.

In the same way, our women have got more widely interested in matters of social welfare than they had been so far. No doubt, before the war, many of them already devoted some of their time and energy to charitable undertakings of various kinds. But the average woman often still mistrusted those activities which take a wife, a mother, out of her home; she thought there was more fuss, empty talk and vanity than real work in them; and she was quite right in a great many cases. She has been taught, however, that it depended on her, and on women like her, to turn this empty pretense into something quite different by inspiring it with the right spirit of service. She has dared, trusted herself a little more, found out what help she was best suited to give, and set to work for the good of all. Needlework may have to be a little more quickly despatched in her home; but, even apart from the material results of her new work, she herself derives some substantial advantages from it—by getting a broader outlook upon the world, a better sense of proportion; by being, somehow, raised above her own circumstances, above her petty difficulties and her emotions.

To meet so many new duties and persevere in them, our women have had to improve their sense of moral and men-

tal hygiene; they will have to do it even further. There is a healthy, a necessary selfishness which most of them lacked; or at least they had been taught to crush it so long that many seemed to have been born without it. They were creatures of impulse; they gave themselves away with admirable generosity, and that is how they got worried with cares, exhausted themselves over tasks sometimes unworthy of them, or, in some cases, followed their hearts further than was beneficial to those they loved. They are now finding out that time for quiet thinking and concentration as well as for rest and recreation has to be made even in the midst of the most pressing duties, on pain of losing the right balance of mind and heart.

The aspirations of our "advanced women," whatever shape they may assume, are all leading that way; they are quickly gathering power; and I don't think they lead us astray. Our relations with the American women who came over to us since the war broke out will possibly contribute to the same result; they can help us because of their freer ways, of their bolder methods of education, of their sense of personal independence, and their gift for combining in common work, for organization. French women are reported to be light, vain and selfish: I have known them as earnest, self-forgetful souls, devoted to a fault. Their lives are said to be frivolous: I have found them full to the point of overcrowding, and so entirely given up to domestic duties and family feelings as to be at times too narrow and confined. Things are altering so quickly, with us as with the rest of the world, that the woman I have sketched may already be a creature of the past. She will not die, though; her spirit is still alive and will keep her more adventurous daughters from pitfalls. There is in her ideal a quality of impassioned devotion, of tender and noble confidence, which

makes it sacred. If we, women of the present, in adapting ourselves to the new conditions of life, the new desires and beliefs of mankind, are to have a future worthy of our past, we must know the value of our traditions, and reconcile as largely as possible the high and simple dutifulness of our mothers with our wish for freedom and for a wider field of action.

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